

effort to educate Americans about reading even to our very youngest children.

For the better part of this century, the world has looked to the United States not simply for military and economic and political leadership but for cultural leadership as well. So as we embark upon this new century, let us make sure that our Nation remains the cultural oasis it is today. I am optimistic about our prospects because of the commitment and the dedication of those of you who are gathered here and because our Nation is honored and blessed by the artists and thinkers we recognize today.

In an age when words and images and ideas are too often diluted, devalued, and distorted, when what we see and hear is routinely reduced to catch phrases and instant images, the men and women on this stage represent instead the profound, lasting, and transcendent qualities of American cultural life.

Now it gives me great pleasure to present the 1996 National Medal of Arts awards and the Charles Frankel Prize. First, the men and women being awarded the National Medal of Arts.

Last month we paid tribute to our first honoree at the Kennedy Center, and I'm proud to honor him again. For some 40 years, playwright Edward Albee has been a dominant and inspirational figure in American theater. His plays offer raw and provocative portrayals of the human experience. He has challenged actors, audiences, and fellow writers to explore the complexities of our emotions, attitudes, and relationships. A native of Washington, DC, he won the Pulitzer Prize three times for "A Delicate Balance," "Seascape," and most recently for "Three Tall Women." I ask you to join me in congratulating Edward Albee. [Applause]

[At this point, the President and the First Lady congratulated Mr. Albee and presented the medal.]

Audiences from Russia to the Philippines to our own shores have experienced firsthand conductor Sarah Caldwell's passion for music and her commitment to bring some of our world's most difficult yet beautiful operas to the stage. Sarah Caldwell has dedicated her life to promoting and introducing opera to new audiences here and around the world. She conducted her first opera at Tanglewood in 1947, founded the Boston Opera 10 years later, and went on to become the first woman ever to conduct the

New York Metropolitan Opera. She is truly opera's First Lady. And if you will forgive me a small amount of parochialism, she has come a long way from our native State of Arkansas—[laughter]—and I am very proud of her.

[The President and the First Lady congratulated Ms. Caldwell and presented the medal.]

A photographer whose work has inspired both peers and casual viewers and a teacher whose ideas and methods have influenced university curricula, Harry Callahan is a national treasure. More than 50 years ago, he discovered the camera's power to capture the sublime and seemingly everyday subjects: nature, the city, and people. His subtle, contemplative pictures convey an intensely personal vision of the world. They have graced photography exhibitions in some of the finest museums around the world. A native of Detroit, his work reminds us that there is always much more than meets the eye.

[The President and the First Lady congratulated Mr. Callahan and presented the medal.]

I'm delighted to honor a woman who has spent some four decades creating and nurturing one of the leading artistic institutions in our Nation's Capital. The Arena Stage is a living legacy of the vision, the talent, and the creative energies of Zelda Fichandler. The Arena is one of our country's leading regional theaters and under her leadership has brought plays such as "Inherit the Wind," "After the Fall," and "The Crucible" to audiences in Russia, Hong Kong, and Israel. In 1976 she and the Arena became the first company based outside New York to win a Tony.

[The President and the First Lady congratulated Ms. Fichandler and presented the medal.]

Thank you very much for all you have done. Musician, composer, and bandleader Eduardo (Lalo) Guerrero has spent a creative life celebrating and exploring his Mexican-American heritage in music from mariachis to orchestra pieces. An Arizona native, he began his career while still in his teens, composing what later became the unofficial anthem of Mexico. In the 60 years since, he has been prolific and inspired, composing songs that have topped the charts on both sides of the border. In 1980 the Smithsonian Institution named him a national folk treasure. And we are honored to honor him today.